

**STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL MOBILITY:
THE FOUNDATION FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE UNITED
STATES IN FUTURE WAR**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: “Strategic and Operational Mobility: The Foundation for the Success of the United States in Future War”

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Thesis: If the United States is to continue to maintain influence as the most powerful nation on earth, strategic and operational mobility, the capability to project credible military forces abroad, must become a foremost priority in the design of 21st century military forces.

Discussion: There are many parallels to be drawn between the current and future position of the United States and the historic positions of England during the 19th century and Athens during the Peloponnesian Wars. A significant similarity is the role of strategic and operational mobility in securing worldwide influence.

The overarching motivations that have historically driven nations to conflict will not change. The combatants in future wars will change their character in keeping pace with technology and world events, but the nature of war will remain the same. Influencing conflicts to support U.S. national interests will demand the actual presence of U.S. forces in the region of conflict; precision weapons unsupported by conventional forces will not alone be decisive.

To meet future challenges, all U.S. forces must focus on expeditionary capabilities. The undeniable ability to rapidly project, build, and sustain credible conventional combat power must become the cornerstone of the U.S. military. To be an effective element of national power the military must have strategic and operational reach recognized by all nation states and non-state actors. To ensure this capability, all services must leverage traditional U.S. strength in logistics to improve deployment, entry, and enabling actions allowing forces to close rapidly and engage in decisive operations anywhere in the world.

The U.S. has built well-trained and equipped forces enjoying virtually unmatched conventional operational capabilities. At the same time, the fleet of ships and aircraft that support the strategic lift needed to move these forces are declining in numbers. Doctrine, forces, and equipment devoted to forcible entry operations are atrophying. The amount of engineering forces currently on hand and devoted to the complex task of improving ports, beaches, and airfields are inadequate. To ensure future success, the U.S. must pursue a more balanced approach recognizing that non-projectable operational capability equates to no capability at all.

Conclusion: To ensure a stable world environment conducive to the interests of the U.S. and its allies the U.S. must assume a leadership role not unlike that of the historic empire nation states of England and Athens. Securing influence is only possible through the coercive effect of undeniable military strategic and operational reach. If the U.S. expects to continue to enjoy success it must be willing to balance the development of operational capability with the robust logistical ability to project forces.

At the dawn of the 21st century, the United States faces a new reality as the world's only true superpower. Like Athens during the Peloponnesian Wars or England at the turn of the 20th Century, the strategic interest of the United State's current and future empire exists well beyond the borders defined by the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. To maintain an isolationist perspective, in which the United States would focus inward and ignore external strife and conflict is unrealistic. The global economic interests of the United States and those of our close trading partners and allies depend heavily upon our ability to wield political and military leverage. Progress and security for the United States demands global stability in a world no longer polarized by two competing political idealologies.

Like all elements of national power, military strength must be credible to be effective. No potential foe on Earth would dispute the ability of the United States to generate military power by building weapons systems and raising effective armed forces. To be effective, however, this military power must represent a credible threat anywhere on the globe. The United States must be able to project the combat power it generates. *Therefore, if the United States is to continue to maintain influence as the most powerful nation on earth, strategic and operational mobility, the capability to project credible military forces abroad, must become a foremost priority in the design of 21st century military forces.*

For both Athens and England during the reign of their empires, strong navies provided the key to strategic mobility. These nation's abilities to knit together alliances, gain colonies, influence trade, and guarantee economic security flowed from the credible threat posed by the capability of their navies to dominate sea-lanes of communication and

to transport, land, and support robust expeditionary forces. The worldwide political situation faced by the United States today, and arguably for the next 50 years, will be similar.¹ In order to wield military influence complementing and supporting the other elements of national power, the U.S. must be able to both generate and project conventional combat power anywhere in the world.

POTENTIAL ADVERSARIES AND THE FALLACY OF RELIANCE UPON HIGH-TECH PRECISION WEAPONS:

In framing the requirement for the United States to strategically deploy forces we must first understand and accept that the need cannot be overcome by technology. In other words, advanced technology precision weapons systems, highly regarded by many as the panacea to high-risk 20th century style warfare, will not overcome the need for men and weapons on the ground opposing our nation's foes. The validity of this assumption is not difficult to accept when measured against potential threats to our national security. It is also supported by both historic and recent examples of conflict.

Consider that to be effective, precision weapons that can be employed by long range, stand off platforms attack targets considered either enemy centers of gravity or critical vulnerabilities to centers of gravity.² Normally targets associated with centers of gravity analysis are command and control nodes, logistical infrastructure, or an enemy's operational forces. These targets are normally found in and are important to developed nation states. The future threat, however, is least likely to be a developed nation state with vulnerabilities easy to identify and attack.

While no possibilities should be discounted, future threats to United States' national security and interests are unlikely to emerge from established or allied nations

states. The interest of established nations states, such as worldwide stability, access to energy, and access to worldwide markets are likely to align with those of the United States. Threats will likely take the form of unconventional foes waging conflict and creating regional chaos that disrupt the interests of legitimate developed nations such as those that occurred in the Balkans, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Future threats are likely to be internal conflicts in nations either friendly to the United States or bordering allied states. International crime, religious differences, and competition for dwindling natural resources and food all have the potential to act as flash points for destabilizing conflict.

Conflicts are likely to erupt along cultural or ethnic lines pitting the wealthy against the dispossessed. Warfare will be found within large urban areas, and will have as its centerpiece antagonists who are infantry fighters with no allegiances beyond those designed to secure a next meal. These threats have been suggested to defy Clausewitzian based western definitions of war in which the nation state monopolizes the employment of violence as a means to achieve political goals. This understanding of war and its nature have formed the west's paradigm since the end of Europe's 30 Years War and is the basis for the construct of centers of gravity and critical vulnerability analysis. These fighters will not be vulnerable to precision standoff approaches to waging war and as a whole require man and material on the ground to overcome.³

While future U.S. antagonists are unlikely to be established nations states, this does not mean our foes will be unsophisticated and unable to assess our strengths and limitations. The significant limitation and vulnerability of the United States in future war, one easily leveraged by potential opponents, is access. To defeat future opponents, the United States will have to be able to rapidly project and sustain combat power at the

source of conflict. Conversely, one of the best approaches for an opponent of the United States to defy U.S. military influence and intervention, is to either position oneself in a location where U.S. access is difficult or to meet U.S. forces “on the beach” denying access.

The recent experience of the United States in Afghanistan provides a relevant illustration of the dilemmas the country will face in the future. Afghanistan is a landlocked nation. Access from the sea through a port or beach facility, generally considered the best deployment option for significant conventional military forces, has not been an option. Pakistan, Afghanistan’s closest neighbor with access to the sea, faces serious internal political liability in providing support for U.S. forces. Limited U.S. basing is the reality as there is not nearly enough to meet the requirements of a robust military force. Even attempts to leverage airpower, a definite U.S. strength, are difficult as allied regional basing rights, in this cold war era Soviet sphere, are limited. Heavy bombers conducting missions over Afghanistan, in some cases, have to originate from U.S. bases. This operational profile is difficult to sustain. Therefore, the first priority for the United States Marines upon entry into Afghanistan was to seize lodgment, allowing a move to seize an airfield to facilitate the introduction of more significant combat forces. Had the Taliban recognized the U.S. need for deployment lodgment in Afghanistan, and been strong enough to focus on access denial, the problem of merely getting U.S. ground forces to the fight could have been even more complex.

Therefore, to meet the challenges of future war, the United States must be able to respond worldwide with sufficient, sustainable force to meet operational requirements. Speed is often politically essential, and potentially the cost in terms of risk to forces

increases every day that passes once the United States commits to military action. This is especially true of a savvy foe with technologically advanced weapons. Each passing day can serve to increase the cost in terms of blood and treasure and may make intervention in an area critical to national interest politically unfeasible. In the future, the World War I tactical race for the parapet signaled by the lifting artillery barrage, becomes the strategic or operational level race to gain lodgment and close the force. For the United States, future success in projecting military power, influencing world politics and encouraging stability, will depend on winning this race.

DEFINING STRATEGIC MOBILITY

The Marine Corps doctrinal publication, MCDP 3 “Expeditionary Operations” defines expeditionary operations as “ the projection of force into a foreign setting...an expedition involves the deployment of military forces to the scene of the crisis or conflict and their requisite support some distance from their home base.”⁴ Expeditionary operations are further defined as occurring in the following sequence: *predeployment, deployment, entry, enabling actions, decisive actions, and redeployment*. Strategic mobility, a requirement for expeditionary operations, involves those *deployment, entry, and enabling actions* predating the force’s ability to ultimately conduct decisive operations. U.S. forces as a whole, not just the United States Marine Corps, must become expeditionary forces and therefore must focus upon this triad of strategic mobility. With the exception of nuclear weapons, the driving factor in the development of new doctrine and weapons systems that must be considered hand in hand with the effectiveness of that system, is the extent to which the doctrine or weapons system complements or enhances strategic mobility.

STRATEGIC LIFT

The deployment portion of strategic mobility is the purely logistical aspect of transportation or strategic lift. To be successful in war, to gain or sustain an operational tempo higher than that of future opponents, the United States will require the ability to deploy or to close forces faster than future enemies. This requirement in turn, points to the need for building and maintaining strategic lift assets in the form of military specific use ships and aircraft.

Due to the expense and limited capability in terms of capacity, strategic aircraft are of limited use in projecting significant conventional military forces. The demands of moving heavy equipment, ammunition, water, and fuel alone quickly overtake the capabilities of aircraft. Other limiting considerations in deploying large military transport aircraft include shortfalls in capabilities and capacities of airfields in potential operating areas. Even with these limitations considered, however, strategic lift aircraft are and will remain an important element in moving forces quickly, especially personnel and critical cargo such as communications equipment or replacement parts.

The United States currently relies heavily upon contracted civilian aircraft to move personnel. This may or may not be feasible in the future considering the limitations of commercial aircraft operating in an austere environment. For this reason, it will be important to maintain a fleet of military specific aircraft such as the current C-5, C-17s, and C-130s which can operate on limited length or limited quality runways. Without the C-17 and C-130 aircraft that made over 300 sorties to the dirt airstrip at forward operating Base Rhino during recent operations in Afghanistan, this operation to gain lodgement would not have been possible.⁵ These aircraft are also designed

specifically to haul military cargo, loading and unloading this cargo quickly. These aircraft also support the employment of airborne forces. In future war, military aircraft could prove critical in moving the forces that seize the required lodgment, be it an airfield, port, or beach required for the introduction of follow on forces.

Military transport aircraft have to be built and be on hand at the time of crisis in order to effectively respond. Producing them to meet a threat, short of total war or national mobilization, is not realistic. Like most military hardware, the lifespan of military transport aircraft is substantial. Aircraft purchased now can be expected to be in use in excess of 20 years, representing a long-term return for a strategic investment. For these reasons, the U.S. must take a comprehensive look at the anticipated need for strategic lift airframes for the next 50 years. Efforts need to be made to consolidate and deconflict competing service interests, and the aircraft need to be purchased as a national security priority to be on hand during crisis response.

Shipping is and will remain the foundation of strategic lift. According to many theorists of future war, the most likely areas of the world for future conflict will be close to the sea in the littorals.⁶ The littorals dominate the world's cities and human population and are accessible to shipping. Ships have the capability to move unlimited amounts of material in terms of size and weight. Only through the use of sealift and shipping can the United States expect to move the equipment and heavy sustainment required for conventional force operations. Like both Athens and England, the success of the United States in the future will depend on the naval dominance required to assure access to sea lines of communication and the quantity and quality of strategic sealift available to its military forces.

Shipping designed for military application, like military transport aircraft, is unique. This is especially true in a world where commercial shipping is most often designed to support the transportation of containerized cargo. Military strategic lift shipping of the future needs to be fast and must be able to accommodate cargo, equipment, and bulk fluids. Military shipping must have the capability for rapid loading and discharge in a variety of port or possible beach facilities. The experiences the United States enjoyed during operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM were unique in the sense that port facilities available in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were arguably some of the best in the world. In many potential regions of future conflict, port facilities cannot be expected to be as robust.

At a minimum, strategic sealift ships should have roll-on/roll-off capability. Self-discharge capability for cargo is another desirable characteristic for operations in austere environments, although to gain this capability there is a trade-off in terms of crane weight and cargo hauling capacity. Ships with minimum draft would be desirable to increase the percentages of world ports accessible, and perhaps even ships designed like the old tank landing ships with flat bottoms allowing operations on beaches should be considered. Whole new generations of ships based upon radical designs to overcome traditional ship limitations are possible. It has been proposed these ships could transport as many as 1,500 troops and 450 vehicles from the East Coast of the United States to the Mediterranean Coast of Africa in as little as three days.⁷ Strategic shipping in support of future war could even have the potential, as has been suggested by the Marine Corps in seabasing concepts, to have the capacity to serve as a floating logistics area.

Ships designed for seabasing would need spaces designed for the transport and storage of incompatible supply items such as ammunition and fuel. They could potentially need maintenance facilities for equipment used ashore or spaces in which to configure and assemble support packages for discharge to units ashore. Ships designed for seabasing would require the capability to receive and discharge landing craft or rotary wing assets to transport support packages to the shore or to forces inland. Seabasing ships, although unique and in many ways limited in terms of traditional shipping, could be a solution to overcome future potential political obstacles blocking the use of land based sustainment areas, particularly in a scenario involving relatively light U.S. forces.

Like military transport aircraft, the United States must have robust strategic sealift. When shipping is needed it must be available to respond and U.S. military forces, to include the army and air force, must be familiar with, plan for, and train for its use. Strategic sealift capability must be broad and the mix of ships dedicated to military use must be varied with the capabilities already mentioned. A homogeneous mix of ships may not have the capabilities required for each scenario encountered or each threat to be addressed. Finally, the use of both strategic airlift and strategic shipping assumes the United State's continued capability to dominate and secure the sea and air lines of communication.

PREPOSITIONING FORCES

The Marine Corps and the army to a lesser extent developed and employed the concept of prepositioning during the 20th century. This concept should be expanded and improved to meet the challenges of the 21st century to include prepositioning packages for all services. Even the air force could benefit by a prepositioning effort that would

include the support required for the building and ground support of expeditionary airfields. The forward prepositioning of both equipment and supplies, either on shipping, as in the case of Marine Prepositioning Ships (MPS), or on land facilities such as the caves in Norway, significantly reduce potential response times to distant theaters. Predeployment actions in CONUS are streamlined and are generally well rehearsed by organizations habitually assigned to the prepositioned assets. Prepositioned equipment and supplies are generally well maintained and complete. The warfighter arrives at the fight quickly, deploying via strategic airlift, and after a short effort to align equipment and personnel is prepared for action.

Cost in equipping and maintaining prepositioned supplies is a disadvantage of this approach as is the requirement for benign facilities to conduct arrival and assembly operations. This up-front cost is off-set, however, because prepositioning forces are effective. They increase response speed to a crisis, augment other forces such as amphibious or airborne entry forces effectively, and offer a robust and tailorable option for the joint task force commander. The effectiveness of the Marine Corps effort has been so apparent that the movement of MPS squadrons to a theater has come to have political significance similar to the movement of large naval formations in the past. Enhanced prepositioned forces with joint capabilities, to include supplies for sustainment, certainly should play a significant role in the enhancement of the future strategic mobility of the United States.

FORCIBLE ENTRY CAPABILITY – A MUST FOR STRATEGIC MOBILITY

Forcible entry is easily understood, but difficult to define. Having the capability depends heavily upon the composition of the defending forces. If a potential foe's best

defense against U.S. intervention is access denial as has been suggested earlier, success relies upon a forcible entry capability.

U.S. forcible entry capability from the sea, principally by amphibious operations, have atrophied during the latter half of the 20th century. Shortages in amphibious shipping, the Marine Corps focus on Marine Expeditionary Units (Special Operations Capable) (MEU(SOC)) and MPS, and the Navy's loss of naval surface fires and countermine warfare capability contribute to this decline. Even amphibious doctrine has stagnated, remaining constant for over 50 years in a world where technology has advanced at an exponential rate. The Marine Corps, the service defining itself though its amphibious character, doesn't even realistically train for amphibious operations above the MEU (SOC) level with the exception of Marine Expeditionary Brigade exercises employing such limited amount of shipping as to miss the significance of the complexity involved. Some would suggest that amphibious operations are no longer practicable, as did George Marshall in 1949, less than a year prior to the Inchon landing.ⁱ The bottom line reality is that for a large percentage of the earth's populated surface, amphibious operations could potentially be the only method for U.S. forces to gain access.

The current shortfalls in amphibious forcible entry capability would be costly to overcome to bring any real capability to the 21st century. Like strategic lift, however, the weapons systems and equipment needed would require relatively long lead times to acquire. Each day that passes is one where this potentially critical capability is not available. Also like strategic lift, capabilities developed and purchased today would have long lifespans and would likely be effective for the next half century.

A naval warfighting focus that does not include an emphasis on the ships and capabilities required for amphibious warfare is misplaced. No significant bluewater threat exists and none will secretly or suddenly emerge without warning. Naval countermine capability required to overcome mines from deep water to the beach is lacking and comprises a significant low cost threat for any opponent to leverage against U.S. amphibious operations. Naval surface fire support platforms are scarce, like amphibious shipping, while the navy's current efforts in this area appear to focus on a precision capability at the expense of the volume of firepower historically required.

The Marine Corps has developed the concept of operational maneuver from the sea (OMFTS) to expand the limits of traditional amphibious operations. Recent Marine experiences in Afghanistan are close to an example of OMFTS in execution, albeit short of some of the essential platforms and capabilities. OMFTS, when aligned with potential future threats, is a visionary capability. It could potentially provide a revolutionary capability for prosecuting what are considered to be "low intensity" conflicts where the entry to ports, airfields, or beaches is limited to non-existent.

In the same sense that Marine accomplishments in Afghanistan pointed towards a new OMFTS capability, they also demonstrated the weaknesses that must be overcome. The Marines that deployed into Afghanistan were able to bring little with them in the way of organic fire support. Logistics during this operation was performed on a tenuous shoestring. Funding is required to ensure OMFTS actually emerges as a robust future war capability to augment traditional amphibious capability.

ENABLING ACTIONS - ANOTHER MISSING LINK

The final leg of strategic mobility allowing the transition between deployment and entry operations to decisive operations is enabling actions. Enabling actions, known as reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (RSOI) are those actions the deploying force must undertake in order to prepare for combat operations. Arrival and assembly operations for MPS forces are an example of enabling operations. Building up follow-on forces ashore and movement to assembly areas constitute RSOI for amphibious operations once the force beachhead line has been established. To a significant extent, like the deployment phase, enabling operations can be considered to be logistics intensive. The build-up of combat power in the operations area involves actions such as ship to shore movement of supplies and personnel, the establishment of expeditionary airfields, and the use and improvement of port facilities. Logistics and engineering capability is a U.S. strength, especially in an operational or strategic attrition warfare environment, where it has been and will continue to be, decisive.

To ensure strategic mobility for future war, the U.S. needs to focus on enabling action capability in a balanced approach to entry and deployment capability. Engineering intensive units such as the navy's Seabees and the air force's Red Horse battalions for example, should be enhanced. Transportation support forces with the knowledge and equipment to operate ports, airfields, and beaches must be robust within the active portions of operating forces. Capabilities to rapidly improve and expand port facilities, to improve and lengthen airfields, or to increase beach mobility should be at the immediate disposal of the United States.

The equipment and supplies needed for RSOI should become part of the prepositioned support available. In other words, the heavy equipment Red Horse would require to improve the capabilities of an airfield in terms of runway length or mission on ground capability should be accessible. Seabee units should have the equipment required to significantly increase the throughput of austere port facilities. Ships devoted to carrying advanced litterage or even floating ports designed after the WW II Mulberries should be considered. Concepts that engage advanced technology to overcome challenges such as sea-state, limiting logistics over the shore, must be explored. Once forcible entry is accomplished and the U.S. possesses the strategic lift available to move the force, RSOI must not become the stumbling block to decisive engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

All elements of national power must be projectible to be effective. The United States wields economic, diplomatic, and informational power because it can export all of these elements and influence anywhere in the world. The U.S. ability to project these elements of national power have resulted in an empire of sorts, a word many Americans are not comfortable with, but one that best describes the reality of the current and likely future world situation for the next 50 years. Military power is no different than the other elements of national power. It needs to be projectable to be effective.

In a simple comparison of pure capability, no nation on earth can oppose the United States and win a military confrontation. Most potential foes operate at a capability level well below that of the United States. To win, the United States must be able to show up for the fight and assemble combat power on the battlefield. No strategic mobility capability equates to limited combat power. For this reason, strategic mobility

must be realized up-front before other considerations are addressed. Strategic mobility capability to meet whatever threat may appear along the total spectrum of conflict should be a foremost priority.

There are always advocates for the development and employment of what is called strike forces. These forces are envisioned as highly capable, defined in terms of firepower, and light, precluding the need for robust logistics. In a narrow scope of scenarios, these type forces may prove appropriate, but for most conflicts their shallow depth will translate to lack of capability and high operational risk. The ability to dominate terrain, a population, or a political environment and wielding firepower are not the same. Strike forces may be able to bring destructive force to the battlefield, but they will have difficulty securing victory.

Logistics, transportation, and engineering historically are U.S. strengths. Arguably these are the capabilities that were decisive in every war of the 20th century. With this in mind, it is difficult to understand the advocacy of precision weapons systems that promise battlefield success with an emphasis on reduced logistics. In following the logic encouraging the acquisition of precision systems to overcome the need to employ logistics, we are making the mistake of failing to leverage our true strength. To be truly powerful, we need a balanced approach, one that ensures we keep pace with technological development and possibilities in terms of precision weapons while acquiring the strategic mobility systems needed to project power anywhere in the world.

¹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Warrior Politics-Why Leadership Requires a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002), 1-37. In his book Kaplan suggests similarities between the status of the United States in today's world and the status of both the Athenians, during the Peloponnesian wars, and England during the 19th century. He asserts that in world politics and in the relationships between states there is no modern world and man continues to behave much as he has since ancient times. Kaplan draws parallels between the size of the Peloponnesian world in terms of time and space relative to travel speeds and today's entire world for the United States. Kaplan introduces the idea of the United States and the status of empire in a positive context. He believes the position of the United States in the world entails the great responsibilities of world leadership and solid statesmanship more than he suggests the United States enjoys an empire for the sake of imperialistic gain. He also suggests that the United States should look to the past to understand the future, assuming a pessimistic approach to the interactions between competing states in the new world, thereby guarding against a reoccurrence of the many of the evils mankind has suffered in the past.

² For information regarding center of gravity analysis see Joe Strange, *Centers of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities: Building on the Clausewitzian Foundation So that We Can All Speak the Same Language, Perspectives On Warfighting, Number Four Second Edition.* (Quantico, Va.:Marine Corps University Foundation, 1996).

³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). In his book, Huntington provides an appraisal on his projections concerning a new world order and with it the new face of potential threats to the Western world.

⁴ Department of Defense, United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 3, Expeditionary Operations*, Apr 98, PCN 142 000009 00, p 32

⁵ Col. Carl D. Matter, USMC, Commanding Officer, MEU Service Support Group 15, Lecture given to the Advanced Logistics Officers Course 13 March 2002.

⁶ Department of Defense, United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 3, Expeditionary Operations*, Apr 98, PCN 142 000009 00, p 21

⁷ Marine Corps Gazette, *High-Speed Sealift*, March 2002, 62-67

ⁱ Alan R. Millet, *Semper Fidelis, The History of the United States Marine Corps*, (New York: Macmillian, 1980) 445-474

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